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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 CONAKRY 000726

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SUBJECT: MINISTER PROVIDES INSIGHTS ON POLITICAL STABILITY,
HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE MILITARY

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (S) SUMMARY. A candid discussion with the Minister of Reconciliation suggests that the Guinean Government is afraid of its military and attempting to appease soldiers at all costs in order to avoid a military takeover. The Minister privately acknowledged that the government does not intend to investigate any recent human rights abuses, although the state accepts responsibility for such crimes, and is compensating victims. According to the minister, the government is counting on debt relief and legislative elections to provide political and economic stability in the near-term. Repeatedly referring to the fragility of the state, the minister pleaded for international assistance in order to avoid a "complete political implosion." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Poloff met with the Guinean Minister of National Reconciliation, Oury Bah, on November 26. Bah is one of three members of the political opposition serving in a ministerial position. He is considered the second in command of the Union Force Democratic Guinean (UFDG) party, which is headed by former prime minister Cellou Diallo. This meeting was Poloff's first discussion with Bah since he was appointed minister, although she had met with him several times before he accepted his new post. The Ministry of Reconciliation is a new agency that Prime Minister Souare created in May. Since his appointment, Minister Bah has been very busy making numerous public appearances and organizing various "reconciliation" ceremonies.

WE ARE THE GOVERNMENT OF CHANGE

¶3. (S) According to Minister Bah, Souare's government is the government of change that the Guinean people violently demanded in early 2007. He told Poloff that 2007 represented a socio-political revolution that irrevocably demonstrated how Guineans could unify to force political change. Bah said that former prime minister Kouyate betrayed and disappointed the population when he reverted to the traditional political games of the old regime. "There was a certain euphoria in 2007 and people essentially gave Kouyate a blank check to do whatever he wanted...since he let them down, the population has become even more critical of the government," he said. For Bah, this heightened criticism, in the form of protests and labor strike activity, demonstrates that the government is open to change, and that the population is ensuring that the government is responsive.

¶4. (S) Bah added that the postponed legislative elections are another indicator of change. "We are heading towards elections in a political environment that is fundamentally different," he said. According to Bah, the ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) is no longer able to steal elections. In the same breath, he dismissed the other

leading opposition parties as small players, essentially implying that the UFDG would emerge as the clear front-runner when elections finally take place. At the same time, Bah cautioned that certain individuals, especially within the president's entourage, want to retard the electoral process and are actively trying to create insecurity in order to cause further delays. "Fundamentally, this government is absolutely committed to fair elections," he said.

¶5. (S) Another indicator of the government's commitment to change, Bah told Poloff, is the fact that the government created a ministry of reconciliation. "I say this not just because I am part of it, but because national reconciliation is a key component of our strategy," he said. He pointed out that the government has never before assumed responsibility for past human rights violations, which the government is now doing. "We are acknowledging the state's responsibility for the events of the last fifty years, and offering recognition and compensation to victims."

THE STATE IS RESPONSIBLE, NOT THE INDIVIDUAL

¶6. (S) Poloff acknowledged the recent spate of activities aimed at victims, but asked how the government intends to address the alleged perpetrators of these abuses. In response, the minister emphasized that "the state assumes responsibility for all." When pressed, he admitted that the government does not plan to hold any individuals responsible, emphasizing that the state committed the crimes and as such, the state is compensating the victims. Bah acknowledged that

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this approach would likely be unacceptable to the international community, but said that the state is extremely fragile and must focus its energies on bigger priorities, namely political stability and national cohesion.

¶7. (S) Poloff underscored the importance of investigating the human rights abuses allegedly committed by security forces in early 2007. Bah agreed, saying "in reality, we know everything about 2007, and justice will be served by making reparations to victims and their families." When Poloff said that the USG fundamentally disagreed on this point, Bah laughed and then questioned the utility of proceeding with investigations in the current environment. "What's the point of a human rights commission right now?", he asked, "the justice system does not work, the military carries kalishnikovs...we are better off reinforcing our democratic institutions and then perhaps considering investigating these abuses ten or fifteen years in the future."

¶8. (S) Bah admitted that the government could not publicly acknowledge this approach. He compared Guinea's situation to that of Spain under Francisco Franco, pointing out that Spain eventually granted widespread amnesty. Bah said that Guinea does not want to go that far, but does want the international community to understand that the reparations currently being offered by the government demonstrate the state's acceptance of its responsibility, and its intent to deal with the situation. He then emphasized "We are not doing this (reconciliation) to satisfy the international community, but because it is necessary for our future peace and development...we want the next 50 years to be different."

FORCES HOSTILE TO CHANGE

¶9. (S) Throughout the discussion, Bah repeatedly mentioned the military as the government's biggest challenge. At one point he referred to the military as "certain autonomous forces," and later as "the forces hostile to change." He said that the military situation is unclear and that the

government "cannot risk antagonizing this group." With respect to human rights abuses, Bah made it clear that fear of antagonizing the military was a key consideration in deciding to postpone investigations into recent events. "The most important issue now is stability...we must proceed very carefully...the state is fragile," he said.

¶10. (S) Poloff commented that Guinea's security situation appears to be deteriorating; pointing to a number of recent examples of criminal activity allegedly committed by men in military uniforms, and questioned whether the government's refusal to investigate various human rights abuses reinforces the continued air of impunity among security forces. Bah agreed, saying that the minister of security told him that more than 60% of recent crimes were committed by uniformed individuals. He did not have an answer as to how the government could effectively control the problem, but said that the minister of security is working hard to come up with a solution.

ELECTIONS ARE THE KEY

¶11. (S) According to Minister Bah, the solution to Guinea's political crisis lies in transparent, credible elections. He said that it is absolutely critical for the government to establish a strong democratic base and reinforce key republican institutions in order to more effectively address its immediate problems. Throughout the discussion, Bah repeatedly said that the government cannot control the military until it successfully holds elections. He alluded to the threat of a coup d'etat and implied that without elections, the military may have widespread support for such a move. "In a battle that is not out in the open, do we want classic justice at the risk of instability?," he asked, "it is better for us to establish a strong democratic base and then move forward to effectively neutralize the forces hostile to change."

WITHOUT INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE, GUINEA WILL IMPLODE

¶12. (S) As the meeting drew to a close, the minister made an impassioned plea for continued international assistance. He said that the government absolutely needs money, especially

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the significant debt relief that is anticipated to come when Guinea reaches the World Bank's HIPC completion point. "If we don't get it (HIPC), we will have chronic instability...without international help, this country will implode," he said. Bah pointed to the country's rapidly growing problem with narcotics trafficking and the general threat of broader instability in the West African region should Guinea be unable to effectively address its internal political and economic problems. "Don't abandon us, the risk is too big," he said.

COMMENT

¶13. (S) Bah was articulate and honest in his comments. As a member of the political opposition, albeit with close ties to the current prime minister, Bah's perspective is particularly insightful. He gave the impression that the government is afraid of its military and has no real strategy for getting it under control, other than holding legislative elections. The subtle threat of an imminent coup d'etat appeared to be an overriding concern that has the government focused on doing everything it can to appease the military in the short-term. Bah repeatedly referred to the fragility and the weakness of the state, which he followed with references to an "autonomous military." The government's decision to back

off of human rights investigations appears to be a tactic to appease the military while the official reparations to victims is a tactic to appease the general population. Bah's comments suggest that the Guinean Government is barely holding things together. END COMMENT.

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